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ABSTRACT

With the aim of tailoring future programming decisions to local conditions and concerns, an ethnographic study was commissioned to examine childrearing practices in a small middle income village in Hebei Province, China. The research was designed to learn about the concerns and goals of child care providers, and about the strategic thinking and activities that derived from these goals and concerns. This report details the study of 10 children between the ages 1 and 3 and their caregivers, typically parents or grandparents, who were observed over a 12-month period as they went about their everyday routines. Additional information was obtained through conversations with caregivers. The research was conducted in three stages, each stage during a different agricultural season. Section 1 of the report summarizes the child care arrangements for each of the children studied, showing that arrangements varied by family, and frequently changed throughout the year to accommodate parental employment and other circumstances. Section 2 of the report describes adults' practices and expectations with respect to children's health and hygiene, the various activities comprising a child's day, what adults endeavor to teach children, and children's relationships with adults. The topics covered in this section of the report address the key areas of concern articulated by childcare providers in the course of the research: (1) child health, hygiene, and the body; (2) children's activities, including toys, books, television, drawing and writing, visiting friends, and visiting relatives; (3) purposeful teaching, including names, personal information, songs and poems, counting, and teaching styles; and (4) behavior toward adults, including obedience, addressing adults, and hosting adult guests. (KB)

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by Zhou Yajun, Liao Yi, Susan Champagne, with additional research by Wang Shuquan

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About the authors

Zhou Yajun received an M.A degree in the field of Early Childhood Education at Beijing's Normal University. She has been working as a researcher since 1996 at the China National Institute for Educational Research. Nearly all of the fieldwork on this project was conducted by Ms. Zhou, and she played a key role in the analysis and writing of the final paper.

Liao Yi received her M.A. degree at China's Southwest Normal University, also in the field of Early Childhood Education. She has been working as a researcher at the China National Institute for Educational Research since 1985. Liao Yi participated in the data analysis and writing of the research project.

Susan Champagne received an M.A. degree from the University of Toronto in East Asian Studies and a Ph.D. from Stanford University in the field of Social Sciences in Education. She has been living in Beijing since 1993 where she works as a research consultant on projects concerning Chinese children. Susan provided training for the researchers, helped design a research plan, and supervised the work through the various stages of the project.

Wang Shuquan, a pediatrician and researcher at the China National Institute for Educational Research since 1988, currently works in the field of special education. Ms. Wang contributed to the data collection in the first fieldtrip to the village.

About the paper

This paper summarises the findings of research carried out by staff of the China National Institute for Educational Research which runs the Foundation-supported Hebei preschool education project. The research looked into the childrearing practices of a small village in the province of Hebei in northern China. The project will use the research findings to tailor its future work to local conditions.

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Childrearing in Hubai Village, China

by Zhou Yajun,
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Susan Champagne,
with additional research by
Wang Shuquan

December 1999

Bernard van Leer Foundation

All photos are courtesy of the Hebei preschool education project

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Foreword

Since 1987, the Bernard van Leer Foundation has supported the China National Institute for Educational Research (CNIER), Beijing, in its efforts to improve rural preschool education in Hebei and Guizhou provinces. With the aim of tailoring future programming decisions to local conditions and concerns, an ethnographic study of childrearing practices was commissioned. The research project described in this report was designed to learn about the concerns and goals of childcare providers and the strategic thinking and activities that derive from these goals and concerns.

The research was conducted in a middle income village on the North China Plain. Ten children between the ages of one and three and their caregivers – typically parents or grandparents – were observed over a 12 month period. In an effort to familiarize themselves with the full spectrum of circumstances involved in the rearing of children, researchers studied caregivers and children as they went about their everyday routines. Through ethnographic interviewing, caregivers were encouraged to discuss their concerns and strategies with respect to activities and behaviors observed. So as to capture the changes in childrearing circumstances due to the seasonal nature of agricultural work, research was conducted in three stages, each one during a different agricultural season. All conversations were tape recorded and transcribed.

The report begins with a summary of the childcare arrangements of each of the ten children studied. These arrangements vary from family to family, and frequently change throughout the year, so as to accommodate, among other things, parental employment circumstances. The second section of the report describes: adult practices and expectations with respect to children's health and hygiene; the various activities that constitute a child's day, with a discussion of what adults endeavour to teach children, such as how to speak, read, write, count and draw; and children's relationships with adults. The topics covered in this report address the key concerns articulated by childcare providers as identified in the course of the ethnographic research.

Subsequent to conducting this study, the researchers have composed a manual of childrearing advice for rural childcare providers and are training rural pre-school teachers in matters of family education.

Introduction

The purpose of our study was to learn something about how the people in a small village in Hebei Province, China go about raising children between the ages of one and three. The site of our research was Hubai Village situated on the North China Plain. The village was selected for us by the County Educational Committee.

The report that follows is based on a study of 10 village children between the ages of one and three. Only 11 children in the village fell into the appropriate age group. Extended periods of time were spent with each of the 10 families, observing their lives and engaging the caregivers in conversation about their children. Our interviewing approach aimed to learn about the villagers' childrearing experiences in their terms, in the context of observing their childrearing activities.

As the schedules, pace and activities of village life change dramatically from season to season we arranged three separate research trips – in April, November and June – so as to experience the broadest range of childrearing activities. Each visit lasted approximately twenty days. Families were visited multiple times and each visit typically lasted at least several hours, and sometimes half a day. The researcher, for example, would often arrive at a household just as the family was finishing up breakfast and would stay until lunchtime. Often she visited the same family again in the afternoon.

Zhou Yajun was the key investigator, participating in the full 60 days of fieldwork. Wang Shuquan participated in the first field trip. Liao Yi joined the project to assist with the data analysis and report writing. Her research experience on childrearing practices in another village in Hebei Province provided us with a larger perspective from which to view our Hubai Village data. All three women specialize in early childhood education at the Central Educational Scientific Research Institute situated in Beijing. Susan Champagne worked alongside the researchers throughout the project, helping to develop data collection methodologies and data analysis approaches suitable to local research conditions.

We faced many challenges. At the outset Zhou and Wang spent a great deal of energy trying to convince the villagers that they had not come to take away the village children. (Several weeks prior to their first visit a child from a neighboring village was kidnapped on his way home from school.) A lot of time was spent on this first fieldtrip engaged in easy small talk with the villagers, in the hope that they would discard their suspicions and come to trust the researchers. These villagers rarely have visitors, particularly those whose activities were as mysterious as those of Zhou and Wang.

Some of the villagers believed that Zhou and Wang – who they soon discovered work in an educational research institute in Beijing – had come to teach them how to educate and raise their children. The village adults were eager to

Note: CHY 1 = USD 0.13 at the time of printing.

take advantage of their expert guests to learn about 'urban' approaches to childrearing. The researchers had to learn how to politely refuse requests to 'teach' the village children 'something', and to distract adults who asked them to comment on their child's height, or advise them on such things as how to keep their child from eating too many snacks.

It was only during the second fieldtrip that Zhou felt that the villagers were relatively comfortable with her. Many of them began to reveal things about their lives that they had been unwilling to discuss on her previous trip, and append the stories, or even revise the information they had previously provided. For example, on this second trip it was discovered that one of the families had purposely lied about the child's age.

Another challenge faced on the first trip was understanding the dialect. The villagers have expressions for many commonly used words such as 'yesterday', 'this afternoon', and 'toys' with which the researchers were unfamiliar. The village term used to express 'temper tantrum' is pronounced exactly the same way as the term for 'play', which Zhou did not discover until midway into her second fieldtrip.

All of the conversations we had with the villagers were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed by students at the local teachers' training school who spoke the village dialect. Roughly 140 hours of interviews were eventually transformed into 450 notebooks. In addition to the interview transcripts we had large tracts of text that recorded observations and impressions that were written in the field by the researchers. All interview and observation data was thereafter tabulated through a system we developed ourselves, in a form that could be inputted into the computer and sorted according to relevant categories.

The report presented in the following pages evolved as the result of a process which involved draft writing by the Chinese researchers who worked directly with the data, and Susan Champagne, who elicited from the researchers, through an iterative process the necessary context and background to make this description of the villagers' activities and attitudes accessible to a Western audience.

The village and the villagers

The site of our research was Hubai Village, located about 240 kilometers from Beijing, and roughly 120 kilometers from the coastal city of Tianjin. The village has a population of roughly 730 with 220 households.

Two roads, one running east-west, and one north-south cut through the village. There are two small stores which sell basic household items. The village has a primary school (with attached preschool) and a small clinic where minor illnesses can be treated. For all other services villagers must travel to the county town which is about one and a half kilometers away.

The houses

Village houses are made of brick. They are spaced about six to seven meters apart from each other. The design of all the houses is more or less the same. Houses typically have four rooms, each one roughly twenty square meters, arranged in a row.

At one end of the house is the kitchen which is used for storing and cooking food. The kitchen has running water which appears on an unscheduled basis once or twice a day for variable periods of time. One of the entrances to the house is through the kitchen.

Next to the kitchen is the main room of the house. Here, the entire family sleeps, guests are usually entertained, the children spend most of their time playing and meals are typically eaten. All of these activities take place on the *kang*, which is a rectangular-shaped cement and brick bed measuring about four meters long, two meters wide, and one meter high. Underneath the bed is a flue which is connected to the kitchen stove. Thus the *kang* is the warmest place to sit in the house. The *kang* is positioned against a wall with a window. The vast proportion of village homes in northern China have a *kang*.

The room next to the *kang* is used primarily for storage and in some homes is where the sofa is kept. Owning a sofa in this village is a relatively new phenomenon, so families have not yet decided how best to use it. Zhou, who visited several homes that had sofas was never invited to sit on one, even during the warmer months of the year. Many homes have a second entrance to the house through this room.

At the far end of the house is the room where the fancy modern, usually pink or white, furniture set is displayed. This is a gift that parents typically buy for their sons when they get married. The room also has a bed, which the parents and child usually sleep on in the summer. The room is typically immaculate as it is rarely used.

All homes are fronted by a walled in yard, between 40 and 100 square meters, usually larger than the house itself. The yard is in the front of the house with the main door to the house opening from it.

Family economics

Each family has between three and seven *mu* of land (1 *mu* = 1/15 of a hectare). The family plots in this village are all together in a large field at the northeast end of the village. Families grow wheat, corn and vegetables for their own needs. If there are extra vegetables, these are sold.

The most lucrative source of income for the villagers is the hothouse, where fruits and vegetables are grown. In a good year a hothouse can bring in CHY 10,000. Roughly one half of the village families have hothouses. Families that don't have a hothouse typically have one family member working outside the home in a non-agricultural job. The village is close to the county town, and the numerous factories in the neighboring areas provide employment opportunities for the villagers. Men earn slightly more than CHY 400 a month in factory jobs, women slightly less than CHY 400. Many of the young mothers work in these factories, a few work as shop clerks in the county town. With one exception, all the fathers of the families we studied hold non-agricultural jobs, but take leave during the busy season.

The greatest immediate expense for the families of Hubai Village are farm input purchases – pesticides, fertilizers and agricultural machinery. A large portion of a family's income must be saved for the future: funeral ceremonies for one's parents (for men only) which currently costs roughly CHY 10,000; schooling for one's children; wedding costs for one's son and furniture for his house (roughly CHY 10,000); and money to build a house for one's son when he marries (CHY 50-60,000).

The villagers

Of the families studied, all of the parents received at minimum a primary school education, and most of the men and two of the mothers completed junior high school. Over 80 per cent of the older generation are illiterate, unable to even read a primary school textbook.

The custom of this area, as in most of rural China is for men to marry women from other villages. The current marriage law requires women to be 20 and men 22 before they can marry. All families we studied abided by this ruling. When a man marries, his parents provide him with a newly built house into which he moves with his new bride. Parents live with their married children only if they are not allocated the land needed to build a new house or they cannot afford to build a new house. With few exceptions, married men in this village live no more than 200 meters away from their parents.

Couples in rural China typically hope to have a child as soon after marriage as possible. According to current family planning rulings in this area, couples are permitted to have a second child if their first child is a girl who has already had her fourth birthday, and if the mother is older than 28. However, several families had two sons: their penalty was a large fine. The fine for out-of-plan births has been rising annually.

Nine of the 10 children we studied were born in the county hospital. For the first month after birth, the grandmother typically takes care of the baby and all the domestic chores, while the mother stays in bed, observing the traditional practice of 'doing the month'. During this time she eats large quantities of nutritious foods and rests, in order to regain her pre-pregnancy health and strength. She gradually takes on light housework, resuming her full duties by the end of the second month.

Most women stay at home and take care of their babies until they are roughly two years of age. Most of the women in our study worked full time outside of the home after this. Mothers in this village work outside the home only if their husband's mother is willing to take on the childcare responsibilities. There do not appear to be other options.

Preschool

When children reach five years of age they attend the village preschool. This school, which is affiliated with the primary school, has two grades. At seven years old children begin primary school. A local ruling, about three or four years old, requires children to have completed two years of preschool in order to gain admission to primary school. The current cost for preschool, including tuition and miscellaneous fees, is about must CHY 200 for the full school year. Primary school is slightly more expensive.

Village parents attach a very high value to having their children in preschool. In preschool, one of the parents commented, 'children can learn to sing songs, recite poetry, dance, and learn some knowledge. At home there is only us. We have had so little education, there is not much we can teach our children.' Children have absorbed this reverence for school. In play, Mingming, puts a school bag over her shoulder and announces she is going off to school. One of the more effective threats parents use when trying to teach a child how to do something is to say: 'If you don't learn how to do such-and-such, the teacher will not let you go to school'.

Only one of the village children attends the preschool in the county town. This school is considered to be far superior to the one in the village for several reasons. First, the teachers teach the children how to sing, dance, count and draw whereas the village preschool teachers, according to the parents we spoke to, do not teach the children anything. Second, the county preschool provides three years of schooling, admitting children at four years of age. And third, the village preschool frequently cancels classes for no apparent reason. Parents also complain that the village preschool day is very short, finishing at 10:40 in the morning. However, few parents can send their children to the county preschool as it is only through special 'introductions' that a village child will be accepted.

The children

Following is a brief description of the children studied. All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the families.

Zhang Kangkang

Kangkang, a boy was born in April 1995. He was one year and seven months old when the study began. Until he was 15 months old he was taken care of by his mother, at which time he was weaned and the family set up a large hothouse. In addition to the seven or eight *mu* of land the family had been farming before, with the new hothouse the farm work increased dramatically. Kangkang's mother, who does the lion's share of the farm work, leaves her son with his grandmother for most of the day while she works in the fields. At lunchtime she takes Kangkang home to eat. When she is not working in the fields she takes care of her son. Kangkang's father works as a carpenter. He leaves the house at 7:30 in the morning, comes home at noon for about an hour, and ends his working day at six in the evening.

Kangkang has a brother who is eight years old and has been living with his grandmother ever since he was 15 months. At that time he was very thin, which was attributed to the poor quality of his mother's milk. His grandmother decided that Mother was not taking good care of her son, and took over all responsibilities. The boy moved in with his grandmother, was put on powdered milk, and according to all accounts (including his mother's) he soon began to thrive. He has been living with his grandmother ever since. He now attends the village primary school.

Kangkang's grandmother also watches her youngest son's daughter, Peipei, who is four months older than Kangkang. Peipei is her child, Kangkang belongs to her eldest son. Peipei's mother works at a foreign-run clothing factory, usually seven days a week. Peipei eats lunch with her grandmother and with Kangkang's older brother who also comes home for lunch every day. During the busy season, Kangkang's grandmother occasionally has the three children sleeping at her house.

Photo: Grandmothers play a central role in the family, often looking after their young grandchildren when the parents are out working.

Zhang Mingming

Zhang Mingming, a girl, was born in April 1994. At the start of our research she was two and a half years old. Mingming has no siblings. Her mother hopes to have another child when Mingming is four years old.

Until she was two and a half years old, Mingming was cared for by her mother, except during the busy season. Then Mingming would spend the day with her grandmother but would eat lunch with her mother. She never slept at her grandmother's house.

When Mingming was two and a half years old, her mother began working in a plastic factory in the county town. Now Mingming spends the day at her grandmother's, whose house is about 200 meters away. She is dropped off at 7:30 in the morning and stays there until the evening. Mingming's father works part of the year on a construction team, and the rest of the time he provides transportation for the villagers with his three wheeled cart.

Zhang Congcong

Zhang Congcong, a boy, was born in July 1995, and was 15 months old when we began our research. Congcong has an older sister who is in first grade. Congcong's mother works as a clerk in a department store in the county town. She had this job before Congcong was born, and went back to work when Congcong was three months old when her maternity leave was over. She nursed both Congcong and her daughter for one year and 10 months. Her in-laws played a major role in deciding when weaning should take place: they felt that because her milk was good she should continue to nurse for as long as possible.

Congcong spends his days with his grandparents who live about 150 meters away from his home. His sister attends the first grade class in the county town primary school. She lives with her aunt, Congcong's mother's sister and her husband. The couple has a daughter who is the same age as Congcong's sister, and the two girls go to school together. She has been living with them and attending the county school since she was three and a half years old. Tuition for the county school is higher than for the village school, but because it is considered to be of much higher quality, her parents are willing to pay the extra money. Miscellaneous costs, such as books, pens and so on are often paid by her aunt: the county family is better off financially than Congcong's village family and is happy to contribute to their niece's education.

Congcong's sister is the only village child we know of who attends the county school: she has managed to do so through the 'introduction' of her aunt who lives in the town.

The grandparents do most of the farm work. Mother rarely does any. Father works as an electrician in a leather shoe factory in the county town seven days a week except during the busy season when he takes leave. Mother gets one day off a week from her job, but rarely does any farm work.

Zhang Dandan

Zhang Dandan, a girl was born in October 1993. She had just turned three years old when our study began. Dandan is an only child. Her father and grandfather work as repairmen in a factory roughly 100 kilometers away and return home only once every two or three months. They have been doing this work since before Dandan was born.

Grandmother lives with Dandan and Dandan's mother while the men are away. She does most of the farm work. When the men come home, Dandan's grandparents live with their youngest son for whom they recently built a new house.

When we asked Dandan's mother if she planned to have a second child she said 'Definitely not'. Taking care of one child was tiring enough. However, her mother-in-law sees things differently. Her response was 'Of course she'll have another'.

Zhang Lele

Zhang Lele, a boy, was two and a half years old when we began our study. He has no siblings. Lele lives with his parents and grandparents in one house. Two rooms have been allocated to each family (the grandparents have the *kang*), and an extra kitchen was built. The grandparents didn't have enough money to build a new house for Lele's parents.

Since Lele was two years old, his mother has been working in a clothing factory seven days a week. His father works in a nearby leather shoe factory. Grandmother takes care of Yancheng.

Zhang Yangyang

Zhang Yangyang, a boy, was two years and nine months when we began our study. He has an older sister who is in fourth grade. His mother had several stillbirths before Yangyang was born, but after a visit to a doctor in Beijing, she managed to give birth to a healthy son.
Since she was very young, his sister was cared for by her grandmother because Grandmother said that mother's milk was not good. She still lives with her grandparents.

Both of Yangyang's parents work in the village fertilizer factory where his grandfather is the factory chief. His mother takes him to his grandmother's in the morning, sometimes after his breakfast, sometimes before. She picks him up just before his bedtime. During the busy season, his mother and his grandfather all take leave from their jobs and Yangyang often accompanies them to the fields. Sometimes his sister or his grandmother go to the fields to play with Yangyang.

Zhang Dongdong

Zhang Dongdong, a boy was one year and 10 months old when we began our study. He has no siblings. Until he was two years old he was taken care of by his mother, after which she went to work. Now he is cared for by his grandmother. At night his mother takes him home. Grandmother tends the hothouse. Sometimes she takes Dongdong with her to the field. Often she leaves him for half a day in the care of Lele's or Yangyang's grandmother. The three families are related, and they live very near to each other.

Zhang Kaikai

Zhang Kaikai, a girl, was 13 months old when our study began. She has no siblings. Her mother takes care of her and is still breastfeeding. The grandmother lives relatively far away – about a 10 minute walk. Grandmother farms her own land, and also helps Kaikai's mother with her farm work as she is busy taking care of her daughter. During the busy season, Mother asks a neighbor or an older primary school student who lives nearby to help take care of Kaikai. Kaikai's mother says she will have another child. 'If I didn't,' she said, 'people would think there was something wrong with me.'

Zhang Yuanyuan

Zhang Yuanyuan, a girl, was two years old when we began our study. Her grandparents and parents live in the same house. The roof in the grandparent's former house leaks and they cannot afford to build a new house. Yuanyuan's grandfather is Party Secretary of the village and spends most of his day attending to village affairs. The family has seven mu of land, and Yuanyuan's parents and her grandmother spend most of their days doing farm work.

Zhang Benben

Zhang Benben, a girl, was two years old when we began our study. Benben is mostly taken care of by her mother. Her father is a truck driver. Their family has very little land and no hothouse so there is little farm work to be done. The grandmother does not want to take care of Benben. She has already raised one grandson and has four other grandchildren who are still small. According to local practice she cannot take care of one grandchild and refuse to take care of the others. Benben's mother would like to have another child.

Summary

Mothers in this village typically take care of their children until they reach two years of age at which point they try to find a job in a local factory or shop. Childcare responsibilities are then turned over to the paternal grandmother. Although theoretically it is the paternal grandmother's duty to care for her grandchildren, and most do, she can choose not to do so if she so pleases. Fathers typically play a very minor role in childcare, a tradition which does not appear to be questioned in any way by the villagers.

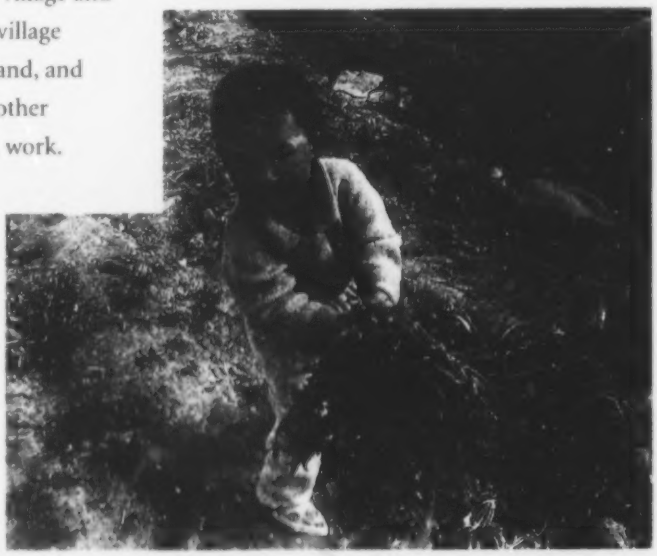


Photo: In busy periods, children often accompany their parents while they work in the fields.

Health, hygiene and the body

Although the children of the village do not appear to be suffering from any serious health problems – they are reasonably plump, have good appetites and are very active – adults pay a lot of attention to children's health. Throughout the day many of the requests and demands that caregivers make of small children are oriented to keeping them healthy. It is with respect to their health, though, that these village parents feel that their children are doing better than their urban counterparts. They think that rural children are stronger, that the air is better in the countryside and that their children are out in the sunshine more.

Breastfeeding

Children in the village are breastfed for about a year and a half – the longest we heard of was two years, the shortest fifteen months. The grandmothers' experience was significantly different – they breastfed their children for four to five years.

The decision when to wean is not necessarily made by the mother, but often by the more experienced mother-in-law. Several children in the study were weaned because the babies were considered to be thin, which the mother-in-law attributed to the poor quality of the mother's milk. Other factors taken into account in the decision when to wean include: the impact of nursing on the mother's work; the season – winter and summer are considered to be bad seasons to wean, autumn is considered to be best; it is believed that children should not nurse for too long a time to prevent them from becoming muddle-headed and stupid; and that the older the child gets, the more she will protest when refused the mother's breast.

Weaning consists of the mother coating her nipples with chili oil, gentian violet water, or mashed garlic. Some women cover their nipples with a bandage-type product which aside from making the nipples essentially inaccessible, also makes the breasts appear unattractive (*bu haokan*) and even scary. During this time babies usually move to the grandmother's house where they sleep until they no longer want their mother's breast.

Eating

Villagers typically eat three meals a day. With the exception of the busy season, meals are eaten every day at more or less the same time. Meals are eaten on a low square table which is often set on the *kang*. During the warmer months the table may be put on the floor, either in the kitchen or next to the *kang*, and sometimes in the yard. Children and adults eat at the same time and with few exceptions eat the same foods. Until they are roughly three years of age children usually do not feed themselves but are fed by an adult. Adults say that when children are left to their own devices, they make a great mess, spilling food on the ground and on their clothes. Children are expected to sit up straight while they eat and not drop food. Once they get up from the table, they are not given anything else to eat.

Adults encourage their children to eat a lot. A plump child is considered to be a healthy child. Adults who have skinny children often worry that the child may be malnourished. Several adults talk about taking their skinny children to the hospital to be checked but none has done so yet.

Children do a lot of eating in between meals. In some households it appeared that children were eating constantly throughout the day. There are many reasons for giving a child food in addition to health-related reasons. Food is often used as a distraction. We once saw Dandan crying and wanting to be held but her mother was busy cooking a meal. She distracted her by giving her a slice of a pear. When her younger cousin took a toy out of her hands, to prevent Dandan from snatching it back, her mother said: 'wait a bit, and I'll take you to the shop'. Food is often held out as a reward. To persuade Lele to partake in a numbers lesson, his father intermittently promises him 'something good to eat' and also threatens to give him nothing to eat.

Most children's snacks consist of manufactured products bought at one of the village stores. These include shrimp chips, instant noodles, cookies, sausage, candy, peanuts, yogurt-type drinks, soy bean milk and popsicles. Going to the shop and buying a snack is one of the children's favorite activities. Many of the children made frequent visits. Mingming went on average twice a day; one day we saw her make five separate trips.

A number of the grandmothers object to these constant visits to the shop for snacks. They think that children get enough to eat at mealtime, that snacks spoil the child's appetite for meals, and that store-bought snacks are an unnecessary expense. Congcong's grandfather said that many of the snacks – the cookies, the instant noodles and the yogurt drinks – are nutritious. Some caregivers see the snack as a way to compensate when children do not eat well at mealtime: Yuanyuan's grandmother told us one day that her granddaughter had not eaten breakfast but had had seven cookies later on in the morning. Her mother said: 'What's the big deal? You get worried that the child is hungry, the child didn't eat well at mealtime, so you spend a few mao. What's the point of having

Photo: After holding a baby over a bucket and making 'sh sh sh' sounds, babies will eventually urinate into a basin every time they are put there.

the child cry?' (1 mao = 1/10 of a yuan). Children typically approach their mothers to take them to the shop, not their grandmothers.

Elimination

When infants are between three and six months of age, as soon as they can hold up their heads, they are trained not to urinate in their clothing. On a regular basis, usually about once an hour, the caregiver holds the baby over a plastic basin, taking each of the baby's legs with one hand, and makes the sound 'sh sh sh'. The position is held and the adult continues making the appropriate sound until the desired result is achieved, or until the baby screams violently in protest. Standard crying is not sufficient for the adult to abandon her task. This process is called *ba niao*. Eventually the children will urinate into the basin every time they are put there. In a similar manner, but to the sound of 'enh-enh' infants are trained to move their bowels. At six months of age, and rarely later than eight months, no diaper product is used.

This process is greatly facilitated by the style of trousers worn by young children all over China; the crotch seam is left unsewn. Once children learn to walk, they need only to squat down without having to remove or even push aside any bits of clothing. Children typically wear split-crotch trousers until they are two and a half to three years of age.

When caregivers want children to use the basin to urinate, they frequently ask toddlers if they have the urge to pee. In the homes we visited, there was always a plastic basin, easily accessible, usually pushed partway under the *kang*. Some families encourage their children to urinate in the yard but only when the weather is sufficiently warm. However, for those children under three years of age, caregivers were not terribly fussy about this and children frequently pee on the cement floor. So long as children do not pee on the *kang* or on their clothing, adults are not too concerned. In some households children sometimes assist adults in sweeping up their puddles, etc. with a small whisk broom. This, however, is perceived as a game, and is in no way required of the child.

When children urinate on their clothing or on the *kang*, adults show their displeasure, but we never saw any caregivers seriously reprimanding or punishing children for this. On this issue there is a difference in perspective between the generations. The older generation thinks that the parents should punish children for urinating or defecating in an inappropriate location.

Once children can walk they are expected to have their bowel movements in the yard. However, during winter adults prefer that children do not go outdoors and they defecate in the house. Basins are almost never used for eliminating the bowels. Children crouch down either beside the small coal stove in the *kang* room or sometimes simply leave deposits in tiny piles around the house. (Some adults boasted that their children had mastered this scattering of their faeces – it is preferable to the single location defecation which often leaves

the child's rear sticky and needing to be wiped up.) It is not uncommon to walk into a home where there is a small child and have to step over little bits of faeces on the floor.

Toilet facilities for adults are located in the outhouse in the yard. Young children, however, do not use this facility until they reach school age, because the hole over which they need to squat is large enough for them to fall into.

Keeping clean

Cleanliness is held in high esteem by the village parents. 'Urban children are so clean', is a comment we frequently heard. Adults discourage children from playing with dirt and dirty water, although they acknowledge that these are the most basic playthings of rural children. Children are urged not to sit on the floor because it is dirty. Adults feed their children at mealtime to prevent them from dirtying their clothes.

Efforts to keep children clean include: washing their faces every morning, and sometimes before bedtime; occasionally washing their feet in the evening; washing their hands before meals if their hands are very dirty. Children's clothes are changed every day in the summer-time and every second day or so in the winter.

Sleeping

Children sleep with their parents on the *kang*. They usually get up in the morning with their mother. Almost all children take an afternoon nap, usually for about two hours.

Preventing illness

Throughout the day adults make numerous requests of children where the main purpose is to prevent them from getting sick. Requests that impact upon children's play include: that they don't go outside when it is very cold; that they don't play with cold water in the wintertime; that they don't sit on the floor to play. Children are accustomed to wearing lots of layers of warm and heavy clothing when the weather is cold.

Treating illness

When caregivers think that their children are ill, they have several options.

1. There is a doctor at the village clinic. This doctor was originally a barefoot doctor and not formally trained. He treats only minor illnesses and sells drugs. Families take their children here to get antibiotics for colds. Villagers must pay for medical services and drugs.

2. For more serious illnesses, or when the treatment provided by the village doctor does not take effect, families take their children to the hospital in the county town. Villagers said that they don't like to take their children there because the doctors' attitude is very bad – the doctors are very 'fierce' and often shout at the parents and the children. One family we spoke with told us that they had taken their son to see a doctor in Tianjin because his baby teeth had never come in.

3. When children exhibit some of the following symptoms, caregivers often diagnose the child as suffering from a condition called 'fright': excessive crying, loss of appetite, listlessness, clings to the caregiver, wants to sleep a lot, appears ill but doctors are unable to find anything wrong. A village elder experienced in exorcising the spirits is called in, and with a simple chant and some head rubbing the child is usually cured.

4. The older generation is most inclined to use home remedies to treat children's illnesses. Mingming's grandmother criticized her daughter-in-law for taking Mingming to the hospital for an infected finger, saying that she raised six children and not one of them ever saw a doctor. She believes that the cooking oil and pepper mixture she rubbed on Mingming's finger solved the problem, Mingming's mother thinks it cleared up because of the antibiotics.

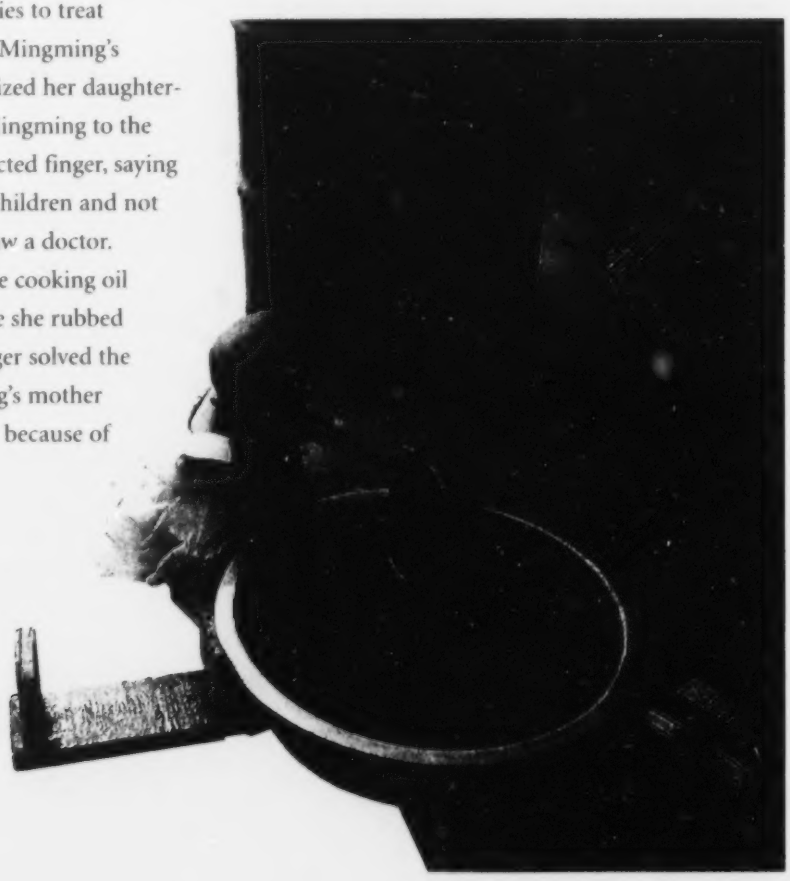


Photo: Water is among the basic objects in the yard that rural children play with.

Children's activities

The indoors

Caregivers often prefer to keep their children indoors as this allows them to attend to their domestic chores. Other reasons concern the harsh climactic conditions. Caregivers do not allow children to go outside when the weather is at its coldest. In the hottest months of summer adults are afraid that the heat is too much for the children to bear and they want to prevent their children's skin from tanning. Dark skin is considered to be unattractive. Several adults said that they prefer small children to play indoors because they don't want them to get dirty.

When children are indoors, they usually play in the room with the *kang*, and occasionally in the kitchen. Caregivers like to put their children to play on the *kang* when they are busy attending to chores. As the *kang* is over a meter high, children of two years of age cannot climb down on their own. In the winter it is the preferred place as it is warmer there than anywhere else in the house.

It is on the *kang* where the strictest standards of cleanliness in the entire household are set. Children cannot wear their shoes when playing on the *kang*, urinate, or play with water. Adults usually give the child a toy or a household object to play with on the *kang*. Children can also look out the window into the courtyard. And despite caregivers' frequent admonishments, children often play with the curtains, with the bedding or jump up and down.

Toys

All children have at least a few store-bought toys. The toys we most often saw were dolls, cars, swords, guns, and small plastic

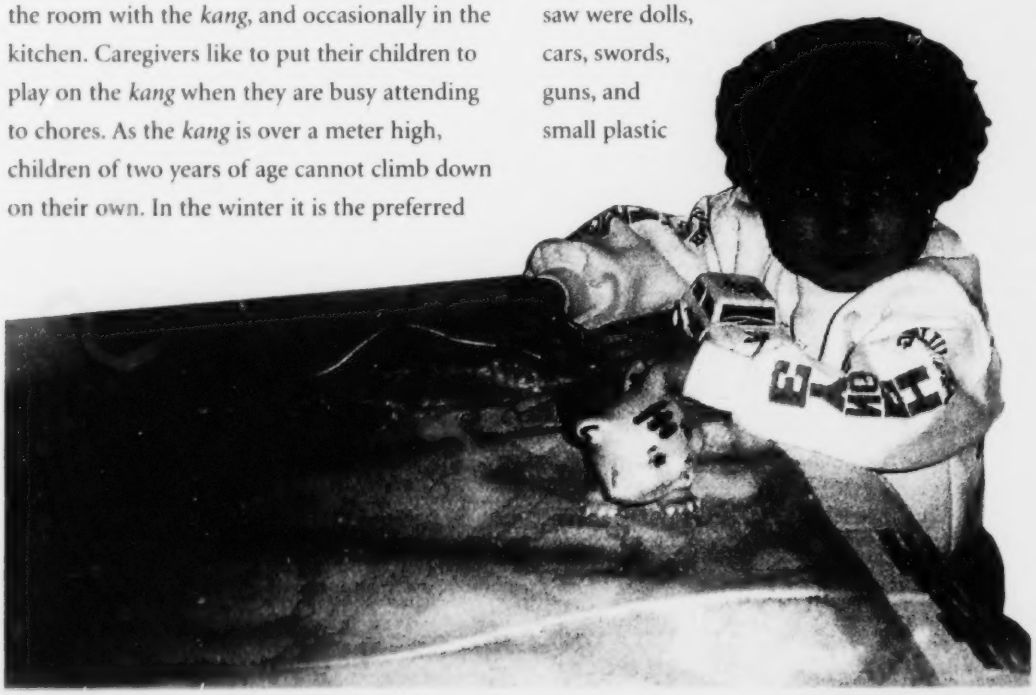


Photo: All children have a few store-bought toys. The *kang* is used by the children as a play area, though the strictest of rules apply to cleanliness.

animals. Several children had balls and blocks. Congcong had a plastic owl piggy-bank which he inherited from his sister. There does not seem to be much difference between the toys owned by boys and girls or their preferences as to what they play with.

Adults rarely buy toys for their children. The general opinion is that toys are expensive and they break easily. On Chinese New Year and on their birthdays children sometimes receive toys from their relatives. Most of the toys owned by the children were bought at a large outdoor market about a kilometer's distance from the village.

Some toys are hand-me-downs. For example Kaikai had a small plastic Santa Claus which was given to her by her cousin. Some toys are borrowed from other children. The three boys who often play together – Lele, Yangyang and Dongdong – casually take toys from each other's homes.

As villagers often discard their unwanted belongings on the road, this is a place from which many children's playthings are acquired. Mingming's grandmother picked up a plastic flower and some pages from a children's book for her granddaughter. Empty cigarette boxes and wrappers from candy and other snacks are often collected for children to play with.

In some homes children are given a special place to keep their toys. Dandan's and Congcong's toys are kept in a drawer. Lele's are stored in a plastic box. These toy boxes and drawers usually contain a hodgepodge of items, including miscellaneous household objects such as old batteries and bicycle bells.

Books

A favorite activity of both children and their caregivers is looking at books. We observed every one of the children we studied initiate book activities, usually taking a book to an adult wanting to have it read. Some children can remain engrossed in looking at books for an impressively long period of time. We once saw Kangkang, for example, spend forty minutes looking at a book with his mother. Adults are particularly keen to foster their children's interest in books. They encourage children to play with paper, books, schoolbags – anything connected to school.

What kinds of books do children have? Most of the books we saw children 'reading' were primary school exercise books or textbooks handed down by older children. Dandan's maternal grandmother had given her granddaughter a language textbook used in the later grades of primary school. The book contained stories, but no pictures. *Kangkang* has several school books his older brother is no longer using. Mingming likes to look at the few pages torn out of a preschool textbook that her grandmother found for her on the road.

Mingming's mother made a book for her daughter from a large sheet of waterproof cloth which she took from the factory where she

works. She cut out twenty pieces of cloth, then sewed them together at the sides. On each sheet she drew a picture: a mother, a father, a grandmother, a cabbage, a stool, a rabbit and so on. Mingming loves this book and looks at it over and over again.

Children also like to 'read' the magazines lying around the house. These are usually Party magazines collected from the Village Committee. They contain no pictures.

Only two of the children, Kangkang and Lele, had books appropriate for children of their age. These were small color picture books bought at the bookshop in the county town by their grandmother, and mother respectively. Adults rarely buy books for small children because the children usually tear them up.

Adults use books to teach children to recognize and say the names of objects. A picture is pointed to, either by the child or the adult; the adult says the name of the object, and the child repeats what the adult said. Names of objects in Chinese rarely exceed one or two characters or syllables. The word is often repeated several times until the child's pronunciation is correct. Only the name of the object is taught: its constituent parts are not named and none of its attributes are discussed. Picture books are not used to tell children stories.

When children look at books on their own, particularly if there are no pictures, they often recite poetry as they turn the pages. We saw Mingming reciting Tang Dynasty poetry as she

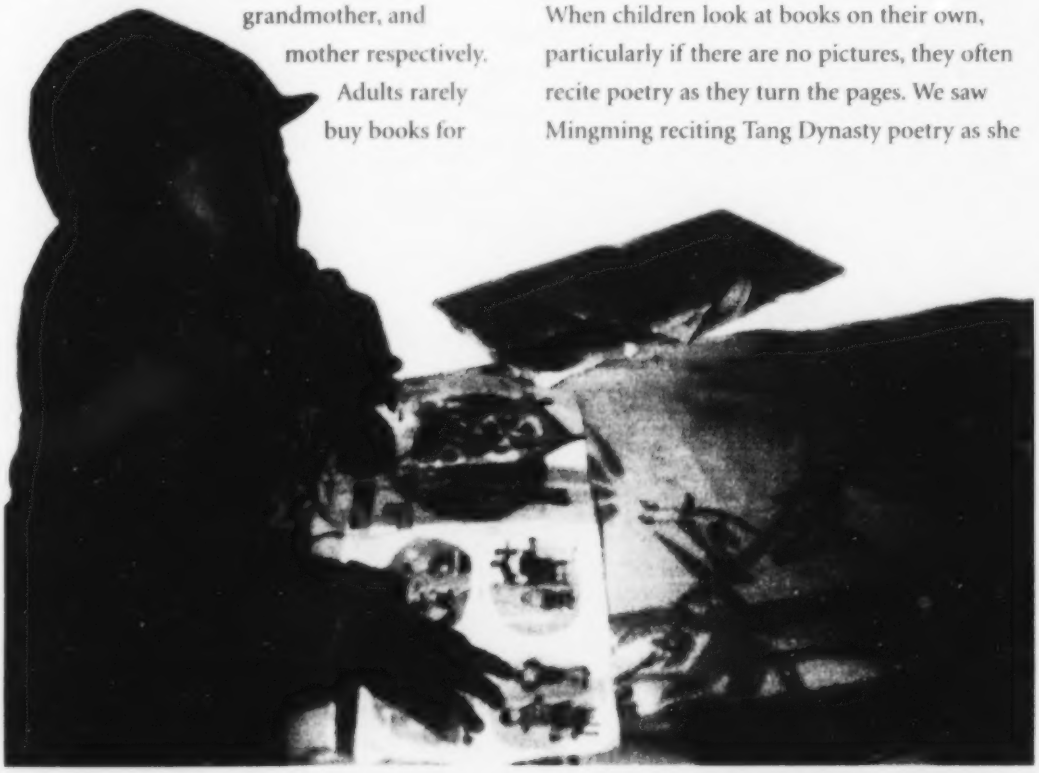


Photo: Parents encourage children to look at books and pictures, which they use to teach the children the names of objects.

flipped through the pages of a Party magazine. Her mother said that she often encourages her daughter to do this.

We observed Dandan's mother read a Pushkin story to her daughter from the textbook they have in their home. The story was well beyond Dandan's level of comprehension. She pointed to each word as it was read. After reading most lines she asked Dandan to repeat what she had said. It took about fifteen minutes to read the story.

Television

All the houses we visited have a television, some black and white, some colored. There did not appear to be any regularity to television viewing habits. Adults and children often sat on the *kang* and watched television together.

The village women mostly watch soap operas. These are usually love stories or martial arts sagas. Entertainment shows with song and dance performances are also watched. There are several programs for children: some cartoons and song and dance performances by children.

We observed adults using the television to further their children's recognition of objects and proper pronunciation of their names. Children also learned songs, dances and poems from the children's performance programs. Sometimes children sang along with the performers.

One afternoon at Dandan's house, we saw her mother watch over three hours of television. She says that this is not unusual for her when there is not much farm work to do. Dandan hardly interrupted her mother, playing quietly on her own, occasionally sitting in her mother's lap.

Drawing and writing

When children reach the age of about one and a half, adults often give them a pencil or a ball point pen and an old magazine or piece of used paper, and tell them 'Draw something' and they go off to attend to some domestic chore. The child is also told what to draw: 'Draw the numbers one and two' and 'Draw a squiggle' (*daodao*) were the most commonly heard requests. Although children are almost never provided with drawing tools without some instruction as to what to draw, caregivers rarely pay much attention to what the child produces, particularly in the case of children under two years of age. According to the researchers, children mostly drew squiggles because 'they are too young to draw anything just yet.'

Once children get a little older, they are expected to be able to draw certain things in an appropriate fashion. We witnessed Dandan's mothers' reaction to a drawing her daughter had made of a person. Her comments included: 'Does this look anything like a person? Where is the hair? Don't you dare draw in such a crazy way!' After several more similar criticisms she concluded by calling her daughter a 'stupid egg.' This kind of criticism is not atypical when children produce written works that are felt to be inadequate. Children older than two years of

age are usually taught how to write numbers. This is also taken seriously by the village caregivers. (See 'Purposeful Teaching')

Children are not permitted to use their left hand to write or draw. This is one of the few things about which adults are absolutely inflexible. A child who uses his or her left hand will have the pen taken away and put into the right hand every time.

Researchers reported that children love to watch adults draw pictures for them. Many of the children had watches drawn on their wrists. *Kangkang*'s grandmother made picture cards for her two grandchildren, drawn on cigarette boxes.

Other indoor activities

Most houses we visited have photographs of family members either in photo albums or hanging on the wall. Children love to look at these and say the names of the people in them. Another favorite activity is looking in the mirror with an adult and guessing who the reflected people are. All homes had playing cards, with which we frequently saw children playing.

The children love to have their faces made-up. When a child refuses to have her/his face washed, adults often promise a face making-up session in exchange for compliance. Children's faces are made up when they dress up, for the Chinese New Year holiday, when a photo is being taken, or when a guest is expected. Often

it is done just for fun, in some households as often as three or four times a week. It is always the mother who makes up the child's face. Girls' faces are made up with lipstick, eyebrow pencil, and rouge. Their nails are done with nail polish. Boys' make-up is usually limited to a red dot in the middle of the forehead and nail polish. Mingming once got hold of the make-up when no one was watching and painted her entire face much to the amusement of her mother.

Children often wander around the house randomly picking up objects to play with. Some of the things we observed children playing with were: matches (scattered on the floor and returned to their box), lighters (small children cannot light them), hair clips, small

Photo: The children love to have their faces made up, which is always done by the mother.

knives (fruit knives, pencil sharpener knives, razors), thermoses, cups, make-up, sewing needles, mirrors, combs, ladles, buckets, mops, brooms, old watches, used batteries, pills (usually played with under the supervision of an adult) and water. In the kitchen we saw children play with leftover food, the wok, cooking utensils, the fire stick, water ladles and coal.

When a child picks up something that the adult considers to be dangerous, often the adult asks once or twice that the child put the object away, but then gives up. Often the adult is focused on some domestic task and does not pay attention to ensuring that the demand is met. On one occasion we saw Kangkang's mother ask him several times to put away a sewing needle which he played with for some time before it became lost in the pile of bedding. Not infrequently adults give in to children's requests to play with objects they consider to be dangerous by playing together with the child. We observed this in the case of pills, which adults would sometimes empty out of their containers in accordance with a child's request and supervise the child's play. We observed several occasions in which the 'dangerous' object was placed out of the child's reach.

The village adults think that it is natural that children wander around and casually pick up things that look interesting to them. It appears that the consequence of forbidding a child to play with something is what is foremost in adults' minds and what they orient to, rather than the potential consequence of an accident. When children are refused an interesting object they tend to throw temper tantrums: it is not uncommon for children to throw themselves on the floor and roll around shrieking until they get their own way. Some adults say, 'there is no way but to give in.'

One of the few things that the village adults appeared to be consistently strict about is that children not play with the potable water that is set aside in buckets. They are particularly strict about this in the wintertime as the water gets extremely cold and they don't want children to get sick or to get their coats wet. (Coats are worn in the house).

Adults often made toys for their children to play with. Congcong's grandmother would sometimes tie a rope to a wooden stool which Congcong would pull around the room. Dandan's mother made earrings and a ring out of paper for her daughter. Dandan had a home-made sandbag which she would throw around in the yard.

Children are not allowed to sit on the floor. The floor is cold and dirty and insects can crawl under little girl's trousers. Small children learn to crawl on the *kang*, never on the floor.

Children sometimes squat down and play, for example, rolling their little cars on the ground. We did not observe children sitting for any extended period of time without an adult insisting that they get up. However, small children and those who have just

learned to walk like to crawl on the floor although adults try to ensure that they don't. Villagers praise children when they tidy up their toys but do not insist, and often do not even suggest that they do so.

In the yard

In the winter the door to the yard is bolted, but when the weather gets warmer, children are often permitted to play in the yard, even when the adult is busy indoors.

All Chinese yards are walled in. The yards in this village typically have brick-laid floors. Most yards have an outhouse, and a shack. Some families keep chickens, ducks, pigeons or donkeys in their shacks. All families have a small covered well in their yard: water is drawn through a tap. Many domestic chores are done in the yard. Children often like to accompany adults in their work, such as helping them wash clothes, feed the animals, husk corn, and sweep the ground.

Children love to play in the various basins and buckets of water. Adults are relatively strict about not allowing children play in the basins of dirty water that clothes have been washed in but children manage to get into them all the same. We saw children playing with the coal that is stored in the yard. Children also like to play in the debris that caregivers are trying to sweep away. Children like to watch the donkeys and the pigeons. A favorite game is to chase the chickens. Some yards have trees or small plots of flowers,

Photo: Children often help their parents in their domestic tasks – such as helping sweep the yard.

and the children sometimes play in the surrounding dirt. Adults often bemoan the fact that children spend so much time playing in the dirt. However, we rarely saw adults actually forbidding children to do so and sometimes saw them initiating this as a form of play.

Children often run around the yard, chasing each other and playing other active games. We saw children throwing small sandbags around, made for them by adults.

Most of the children we studied has a tricycle which they ride in the yard, sometimes in the house and often on the road. Yangyang rides a bicycle with training wheels which belongs to his sister. Tricycles cost between CHY 50-60 and Yangyang's bicycle cost his family CHY 200. These were bought in the department store in the county town.

Some of the children had chalk which they used to draw with on the ground in the yard. We saw Mingming drawing numbers in her yard. The chalk comes from other village children who must have taken it from the school.

Outside the home

Adults usually keep the door between the yard and the road bolted. They want to prevent their children from getting hit by a car or wandering into the village cesspool.

The village store

Walking down the road to one of the village stores to buy a snack is s a favorite pastime of these children. Children are frequently taken, in some cases as often as once as several times a day.

Visiting friends

Adults often take children to other children's houses to play. Some of the caregivers love to go visiting and take the children out any chance they get. Others do not enjoy visiting and keep their children at home. In most cases adults take children to neighbor's or relatives' homes where there are other young children to play with. Most adults have stated a preference for having their child play with older children as they can learn songs, poems, or how to count from the older child.

Adults sit and chat while children play, usually but not always, in the same room. Adults typically do not interfere except when they notice a child doing something dangerous or when children fight with each other. When children argue over a toy, the adult tries to settle the disagreement by reprimanding the child who took the toy, and comforting the child from whom it was taken. If the adult is unable to extract the toy from the perpetrator, another toy is presented to the one who lost out. Adults sometimes talk to children about taking turns. Older children are expected to give in to younger children. Hosts are expected to let their guests have first choice of the toys.

When a physical fight breaks out adults immediately intervene. The child who has been hurt has his or her injury investigated. The child who did the hitting is reprimanded and

sometimes spanked. Finally the child who was in the wrong is asked to apologize and comfort the child who was hurt.

Mingming's grandmother often takes Mingming to her friend's home where there are no other children around. Mingming is expected to sit on the *kang* quietly without anything to play with while her grandmother chats.

The road

Adults occasionally take children to play in the road. Children ride their tricycles in the road, run around with other children or play with insects. The younger children often like to watch the older children play.

The fields

Children frequently accompany adults to the fields. Although the children appear to enjoy themselves – playing with insects, helping adults pull weeds, play with the tools and do other kinds of farm work – adults prefer to leave children at home if there is someone there to watch them. Children cause trouble: Dongdong's grandmother complained how he had nearly wasted an entire bag of pesticide, dumping it onto the ground and mixing it into a pile of dirt.

Visiting relatives

If the mother's native village is not too far away, mothers occasionally take their children on day trips to visit maternal relatives.

Photo: Children often accompany parents to the fields, and often enjoy themselves pulling weeds.

Purposeful teaching

Many of the villagers lamented the fact that their children do not have the opportunity to go to preschool before they turn five. At preschool children are 'taught' (*jiao*) 'knowledge'. (*zhishi*).We were often told by the mothers and grandmothers that due to their limited educational background they were not in a position to teach their children anything.

The villagers have very specific ideas in mind as to what constitutes useful and appropriate learning for children of two and three years old. In the following we outline the efforts made by caregivers to teach (*jiao*) their small children, as we observed and as they described them to us.

Names of things

Adults actively teach their children to say the names of things, mostly household objects, animals, and things which children see in their everyday lives. This teaching consists of the child repeating a word after the adult. The word may be initiated by the adult or by the child. Adults say the word very slowly and clearly. Adults are usually concerned about pronunciation and ask the child repeat a word until it is said correctly. Children are often asked to repeat the same word several times over.

We observed this kind of activity happening naturally and spontaneously in the course of everyday life. Adults also use picture books and television as aides to teach children to say the name of things. We did not observe any attempts to teach children under two years of age to say a full sentence.

Personal information

When children first begin to speak they are taught how to answer certain kinds of questions about themselves and their families. They are taught how to say their formal name (although this would never be used during their childhood) and the full names of all of the members of their family (which a child would never use in addressing his/her elders). Children are taught to say how old they are, and to say what year they were born in according to the Chinese animal zodiac. They are also taught the animal zodiac year of all members of their immediate families. They are taught to respond to the question, 'Where do you live?' with 'I live in Hubai Village.' These questions are often put to the child when guests are present as another form of showing off a child's skills.

Songs and poems

At two and three years of age children learn how to recite poems and songs. We heard children of this age reciting classical poetry, Cultural Revolution poems, folk poems and modern children's poems. Most of the children between two and three years old could recite about three poems and/or songs. Several of the children could recite eight. The reciting of poems and songs by children is a traditional practice in China. Children learn to memorize

these in preschool and their repertoire grows through primary school. Younger children learn these songs and poems from their caregivers who make concerted efforts to teach them, from television and from older children.

Classical poems use classical language and are typically four lines long and rhyme. The poems most commonly recited by children are about animals, scenery and homesickness. Modern children's poems and songs use simple language and are based on themes that are amusing to young children. The classical poems and children's songs we heard were all familiar, and are probably taught to Han children all over the country. Some of the folk songs are particular to the region and were not familiar to the researchers.

Caregivers ask children to recite songs and poems for different occasions and varying purposes throughout the day. Most commonly adults encourage children to sing songs and recite poetry as a distraction – so that the caregiver can attend to her work. As children usually enjoy singing and reciting poems, a whining or crying child is often encouraged to sing a song or recite a poem.

Children are almost always expected to perform for guests. Whenever the researchers arrived at a child's home, the child was asked to perform. They are sometimes asked to do so when neighbors or relatives visit. Caregivers tell the child what song or poem to recite. If the child does not comply, the adult typically persists. Once when Mingming refused to recite a certain poem, her grandmother settled on having her dance. Threats are sometimes lodged, rewards are occasionally offered.

Children are expected to stand up straight while they are performing and to speak or sing in a loud and clear voice. If a mistake is made the caregiver corrects it. Sometimes the adult recites along with the child. If the child cannot finish, the adult sometimes completes the piece. After a recitation, the child is typically praised by both the caregiver and by the person for whose benefit the song or poem was performed. A child who successfully recites a poem or song is typically asked to perform another. On several occasions children performed as many as seven consecutive songs and poems.

Since 1996, a simple folk dance originating with minority groups in the northeastern part of the country called the *yangko (Niuyangge)* has become very popular in the village. Adults dancing the *yangko* can frequently be seen on television and now all the village children have been taught how to do the dance. Dancing the *yangko* is part of the current repertoire of children's domestic performances. Sometimes children dance to the music on the television.

Counting

Children under two years of age are taught the words for numbers under 10 but are not expected to be able to recite them in their proper order. Numbers are introduced casually and spontaneously in the course of everyday

life. We once observed a grandmother, while playing with her grandchild, say the numbers 'seven, eight' over and over again, with the child repeating after her. After each repetition she praised the child with a 'very good'. She continued by adding the number 'six' to the beginning of the sequence. We observed one child counting the chopsticks at the table with the assistance of the adults.

Children over two years of age are taught and expected to know how to count to ten. Some caregivers are very strict about this. Lele's father is teaching his son how to count by showing him pictures and asking him to count the objects. On one of our visits he told Lele he wouldn't give him anything to eat if his son did not count properly. He also promised he would buy him something good to eat if Lele did well. When that didn't work, he pinched Lele's rear. Lele sometimes hides from his father when he knows that a numbers lesson is coming up.

Writing numbers

Many children over two are taught how to write numbers. Teaching children to write numbers is taken seriously and we saw children being scolded, insulted and hit when they made mistakes.

First they are taught how to write the number 'one'. When very young children draw a line they are told that they have written the first number. The second number they learn to write is 'two'. It is rare that the number 'three' is taught before 'two' has been mastered. Adults make certain that the pen or pencil is held correctly.

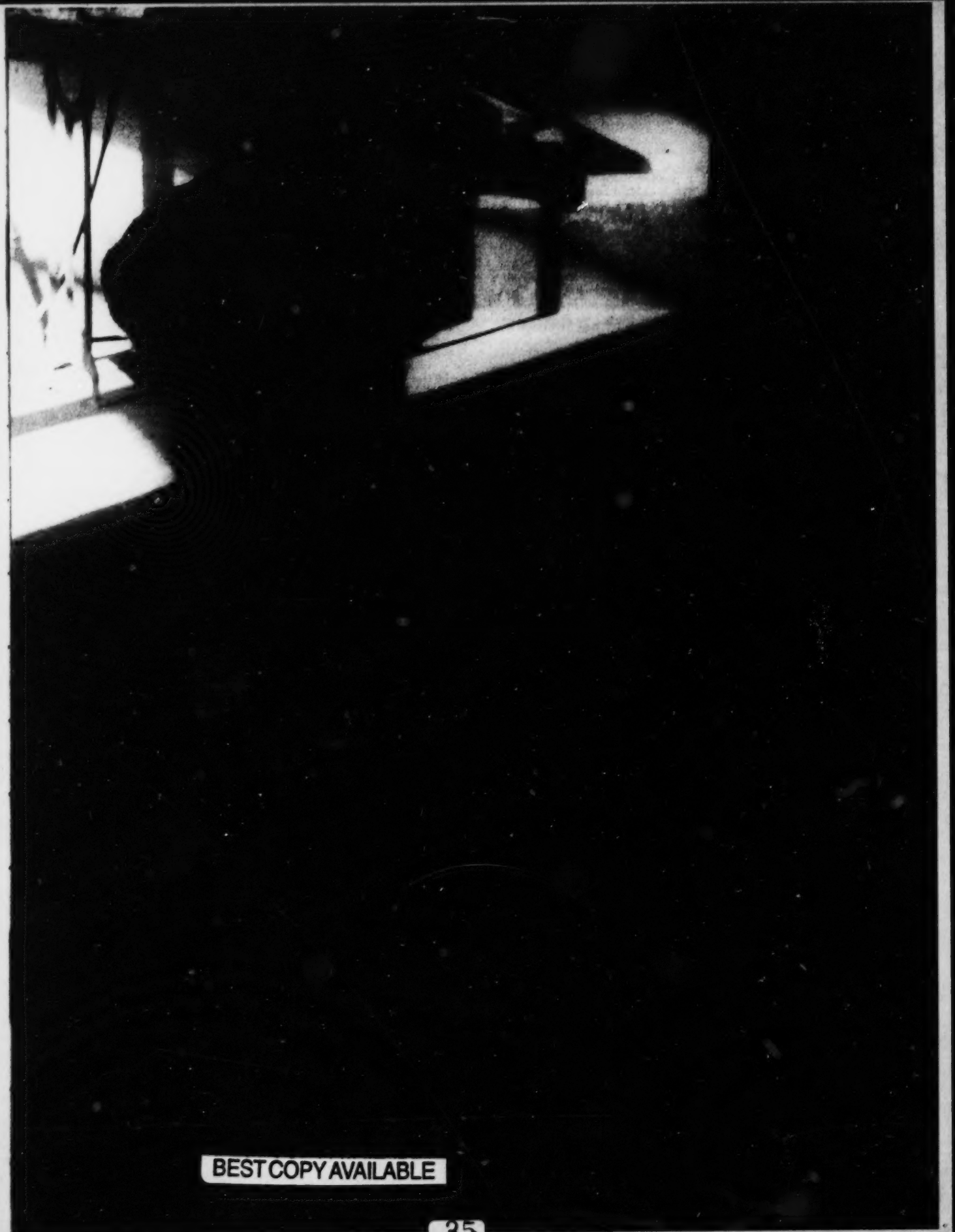
Ways and styles of teaching

There is no systematic method for teaching any of these skills, nor is there any scheduled time put aside for it. Yuanyuan's grandmother told us that she often primes her granddaughter on personal information questions while lying in bed at night. Fathers sometimes teach their children some counting when they come home from work.

Children are criticized, and sometimes harshly so, when they do not demonstrate that they have mastered the 'knowledge' that their caregivers consider important for them to have. In the two to three year old age group this is particularly true with respect to basic number skills.

Village caregivers believe that the 'knowledge' that is useful for children to learn is limited to those things that are taught in preschool and primary school. The purposeful teaching that is done for children over two years of age focuses on these things. Adults also believe that a formalized style of teaching, as one finds in Chinese schools, is the most productive way to instill knowledge. The household teaching we observed appeared to emulate this severe mode. Children who do well in the early stages of their education have a better chance at going to university. Going to university is a dream that all parents in China have for their children.

Photo: Many toys are handmade. Here, a rope has been attached to a stool for the child to pull around.



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Behavior towards adults

Obedience (tinghua)

The adult-child relationship in China centers around the notion of obedience, or *tinghua* (the literal translation is 'listening to words'). This term is also used as an adjective to describe a child who has an obedient character. Children are often praised for being *tinghua*, criticized for not being so, and adults often encourage children to comply with their requests by praising the child in advance: 'you are a *tinghua* kind of child'.

This, however, represents the ideal. All adults would love to have an obedient child, but many children do not fit this description. We repeatedly observed incidents when children did not abide by their caregivers' requests. In fact, adults frequently complained to us that they often feel compelled to give in to their children's demands. Mingming's mother says that if she doesn't take Mingming to the village shop at least once a day for a snack, Mingming throws a temper tantrum and all efforts to distract her – making up her face, drawing a watch on her hand, singing and dancing – yield only temporary results, and Mingming does not relent until her wish is granted. The mother says: 'For only a few *mao*, it is not worth letting the child be so unhappy.' We saw children talking back to their elders, saying things such as 'I will kill you,' we saw children spitting at their elders, and we witnessed a great number of incidents whereby children refused to abide by their caregivers' requests. The village adults complained that their children are hard to manage and are not nearly as obedient as they would like them to be.

However, there are many conditions under which disobedience, talking back and so on are not tolerated. Disobedience is often tolerated on the part of young children. A foul comment issued from the mouth of a young child is often viewed with amusement and attributed to immaturity; young children do not really understand what they are doing and cannot yet understand adults' expectations and demands. However, once children reach school age they are expected to tinghua and this obligation extends until the child is married.

A distinction also exists between what is expected in and out of the home. The more distant the relationship between the child and the adult, the more well-behaved the child is expected to be. At home, parents and grandparents tolerate their children's temper tantrums and talking back. However, even young children know that they cannot behave this way with aunts, uncles, neighbors and so on. Behaving well when in the presence of a distant relative or unrelated neighbor is important so as to give the adult face. Neighbors and distant relatives can tell children what to do, and scold them, although they do not have the right to hit them.

Some adults say that they do not expect their children to be good all of the time, in fact being naughty (*huohuo*) every once in a while is seen as a necessary outlet. If you don't allow them

this opportunity, several adults commented, there is no hope of them ever being quiet and contented and good (*laoshi*). Letting children be naughty, or doing as they please, can be seen as acceptable, so long as the child doesn't cry or disturb the adults' work.

Although children are expected to be obedient to adults, there is also a great value attached to achieving an intimacy between caregiver and child. We heard mothers and grandmothers proudly say: 'The child (I take care of) and I are very close. When s/he is with anyone else s/he cries.'

Grandparents often comment that when they were parents, their children were infinitely more obedient. They were a lot poorer, the adults worked a great deal harder, and did not have the time or the means to indulge their children. However, the situation is frequently described as the children today being different, not the adults.

Addressing adults (da zhaohu)

One of the first lessons a young child learns about how to conduct oneself in the presence of her/his elders is that they must be properly addressed. This involves acknowledging an adult with the appropriate title as a form of greeting. Children never refer to adults with a name – either given name or surname. Family members are called Grandma, Aunt, Great-aunt and so on. Adults who are not related to the child are referred to as *Ayi* for women and *Shushu* for men. Children are expected to actively acknowledge the adult by saying their title.

When a child is said to be impolite (*bu limao*) in this village, what is being referred to is the child's failure to take the initiative in acknowledging adults with the appropriate appellation. Village adults frequently complained that rural children are not nearly as polite as urban children. The children's lack of acknowledgment of adults in the appropriate manner is usually attributed to children being shy, which in turn is attributed to the fact that rural children are rarely exposed to new people. When children neglect to initiate the expected greeting, they will be asked by the accompanying caregiver to, for example 'Call *(jiao* or *Han) Ayi*'.

Hosting adult guests

Small children are expected to play a role in hosting adult guests. Aside from uttering the appropriate greeting, they are expected to offer tea, cigarettes and snacks such as pumpkin seeds and fruits. We have seen children as young as two years serve a cup of tea to a guest.

Children are expected to respond to questions posed by guests. Guests will almost always acknowledge a small child by asking the child's name and age. Children are expected to comply when asked by a family member to sing a song or recite a poem. This request will be made by the caregiver, usually not by the guest.

Children as young as two years of age are not supposed to lie on the kang when guests are around. Children are expected not to take things from guests or play with their bags or belongings.

Concluding notes

The foregoing descriptive notes about the residents of North lake Village provide a foundation for raising a wide range of grounded questions about the goals and concerns of the caregivers of preschool age children with respect to potential educational interventions.

Some of these are:

- are caregivers interested in exposing young children to skills and 'knowledge' that are not rewarded in the Chinese school curriculum? If so, what sorts of skills and knowledge would they find valuable?

- given the nearly impossible task of providing village children (and even urban children) with higher levels of education, how could villagers be persuaded that seemingly extra-academic skills and knowledge are worth any sort of investment?

- given the current childcare arrangements who would be the logical recipient of at-home educational training for caregivers? Grandmothers and/or mothers? How receptive would either of these groups be? Would the concerns of grandmothers differ from those of mothers, and if so how?

- is there any possibility of interesting villagers in the process of learning and exploration, given the high value attached to producing a specific result? For example, that there may be value in the simple process of drawing even if the child does not draw a specific object correctly? If so, given what we know of the villagers' approach, how would the value of an entirely different approach be convincingly introduced?

- does it make more sense to help villagers enhance their own goals and approaches rather than introducing goals and approaches valued by other communities?

- how can we make use of the circumstances, values and concerns of the villagers that we learned about in this study to enhance our communication about education with the Chinese villagers?

Photo: Cousins taking an afternoon nap on Grandmother's *kang*.

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